

In White

DRAGOȘ AVĂDANEI

Universitatea „Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, Iași

The two words in the title refer to purity, innocence, Dickinson's "white election", anything painterly in that color and, most importantly, snow. It is in fact "pastoral" snow poems that the paper follows, beginning with Dickinson's "It sifts from Leaden Sieves", back to Emerson's "The Snow-Storm", and back to Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" and Cowper's *The Task*, and forward to Whittier ("Snow-Bound"), Lowell ("The First Snowfall"), and Longfellow ("Snowflakes" and "The Cross of Snow"). The white enclosure, enveloping or folding of the snow provides the context and backdrop for a series of "narratives" (not all of the poems are of this type) focusing on silence, isolation, loneliness, memories, ... and death. The themes are often similar, and so are the motifs and images of these 19th-century traditionally organized and structured poems. Though Robert Frost himself wrote a couple of pastoral "snow poems" in the twentieth century, "In White" has nothing to do with his poem / variant of the same title.

Keywords: *Emerson; snow poems; Dickinson; pastoral; painterly; intertextualism.*

"The broken snow should leave the traces
of yesterday's walks, the paths worn in,
and bring friends to our door
somewhere in the dark winter."

Robert Creeley, *The Snow*

Intertextualism may seem to be the concept underlying what we are attempting to do here, but we prefer to talk in terms of texts and contexts rather; a more old-fashioned and, apparently, a more reliable method, since *contextus* is a joining together (and this is what we plan to do), so that the context refers to the whole situation, background, or environment relevant to some happening – like a text, in our case; moreover, the Latin verb was *contexere*, i.e. to weave or plait together; and this is very much what we encountered in our exploration – various texts that seem to weave themselves together; once a text is chosen for analysis or scrutiny, the biographical and critical context around it requires the helpful or necessary presence of at least another text, which thus becomes part of the context for the first one; reciprocally, this very first text, in its turn, represents a part of the context for the other text, and so on.

Thus, as we have decided to start from a poem by Emily Dickinson (1830-1886) – "It sifts from Leaden Sieves" – we immediately found out that elements in her biography (intellectual and otherwise) required that we return to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1802-1882), his essays and his best-known poem "The Snow-Storm", but American Romanticism and Transcendentalism (both inevitably connected with Emerson) and this poem in particular suggested that we look at a text by British romantic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834); and Coleridge's poem may have been influenced by William Cowper (1731-1800), especially his long poem *The Task*, while Emerson's first stanza in "The Snow-Storm" was also used as an epigraph for another snow poem by John Greenleaf Whittier (1807-1892), "Snow-Bound", which needs to be seen in the context of the other snow poems by Dickinson, and by his fellow schoolroom poets James Russell Lowell (1819-1891) and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), whose poems anticipate Robert Frost and

his well-known pastorals, or *The Snow Storm* by Edna St. Vincent Millay, or “The Snow Man” by Wallace Stevens, or other similar poems by Conrad Aiken (“The House of Dust”), Claude McKay (“The Snow Fairy”), John Berryman (“Dream Song 28: Snow Line”), Anne Sexton (“Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs”), Kenneth Rexroth (“The Terrace in the Snow”), A. R. Ammons (a whole volume of Snow Poems), or Robert Creeley (“The Snow” – our epigraph), or Robert Bly (“Looking at New-Fallen Snow from a Train”), or W. S. Merwin (“December among the Vanished”), or, back to Britain, Derek Mahon (“The Snow Party”), Peter Scupham (“The Sledge Teams”)... and so on, and so forth to the end of poetry – which, obviously, has no end. Which means we need to stop at our own chosen ending, which itself may vary from one moment to another; we will see. Therefore: J.311

It sifts from Leaden Sieves –
 It powders all the Wood.
 It fills with Alabaster Wool
 The Wrinkles of the Road –

It makes and Even Face
 Of Mountain, and of Plain –
 Unbroken Forehead from the East
 Unto the East again –

It reaches to the Fence –
 It wraps it Rail by Rail
 Till it is lost in fleeces –
 It deals Celestial Vail

To Stump, and Stack – and Stem –
 A Summer’s empty Room –
 Acres of Joints, where Harvests were,
 Recordless, but for them –

It Ruffles Wrists of Posts
 As Ankles of a Queen –
 Then stills its Artisans – like Ghosts –
 Denying they have been –

Granted her well-known and much discussed signature idiosyncrasies of punctuation – dashes and capitalizations – and of language (“vail” of line 12, for instance, has often been “translated” or edited as “veil”, when, in fact its meaning as “gratuity”, “profit” or “value,” or “advantage”, “help”, “use”, or even “salute” or “bow” would work much more appropriately – if anything may be said to be appropriate in Dickinson), this is not one of her often quoted poems (from among the 1775 she wrote) of twenty lines in four stanzas, in the usual iambic meter, with occasional rhymes or slant rhymes and alliteration, based upon an extended metaphor of snow (she was a faithful reader of the “fireside poets”). Most memorable are her leaden (darkness, heaviness, oppression) sieves and the snowflakes as ghostly artisans (n.b.) that beautify and disappear. In spite of its whiteness (powder, alabaster) – or just because of that – the snow that levels everything is associated with age (and death) – “the wrinkles of the road”, oblivion and memory (“recordless, but for them”, “artisans.../ that / have been”), convincing once again that “a Dickinson poem is not about an experience; it is the experience...”(Stauffer: 157) of watching the snow fall in New England (“because I see – New Englandly”).

Though our purpose is not to discuss Dickinson’s revisions and variants (Thomas H. Johnson

does that expertly in his 1955 edition of her Complete Poems – hence the J.+ number in identifying her titleless poems), we find it fit to include a shorter version of this poem – F.(Franklin) 291:

It sifts from Leaden Sieves –
It powders all the Wood –
It fills with Alabaster Wool –
The Wrinkles of the Road –

It scatters like the Birds –
Condenses like a Flock –
Like Juggler's Figures situates
Upon a baseless Arc –

It traverses yet halts –
Dispenses as it stays –
Then curls itself in Capricorn –
Denying that it was –

It is a much weaker one, we think (except for the Capricorn constellation touch), that can be grouped with her other snow poems: “A little Snow was here and there” (the idea of play – n.b. –, plus memories and age), “I counted till they danced so –” (i.e. the snowflakes playing again), “In snow thou comest –” (separation), “Snow beneath whose chilly softness...” (with the image of “austere snow” and death once more), “The Snow that never drifts –” (“transient” and “fragrant” snow, the “pang” of loneliness, memory, and “winter as a face” like in “It sifts...”), “Apparently with no surprise” (where “The Frost... is... the blond Assassin” of happy flowers), and J.995, containing “This was in the white of the year...”

“It sifts from Leaden Sieves –” and all these other snow poems “in white” were most probably written in 1862, the year when she composed no less than three-hundred and sixty-six poems as compared to sixty-five in 1860, eighty in 1861, one-hundred and fifty in 1863 and about one hundred in 1864, an “explosion” offering a good moment to have a look at Dickinson’s emotional-intellectual-imaginative-creative career in this period. First, in 1849 or 1850, her first Platonic “lover”, a young graduate of Amherst (her native village / town), Benjamin / Ben Franklin Newton (d.1853), who had introduced her to the Brontë sisters, gave her a copy of Emerson’s poems (the 1841 edition, most likely); she had already been steeped in Emerson’s essays, and may have also met him as the sage of Concord visited Amherst several times and after a lecture on December 16, 1857, spent the night in Austin (brother) Dickinson’s home. No wonder then Emily Dickinson took to herself much of Emerson’s theory of poetry and the imagination, that remained an influence on her throughout her life. Hence the striking coincidence of themes, attitudes, and even language in her many poems about nature; hence also the ambiguity of her religious attitude and her sense of guilt (her “freckled bosom”); and hence what one critic called “the reign of wonder”, i.e. the idea that the poet is bound to the things of this world and needs to explore those things to detect the miraculous in them – in the common:

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings –
An Attar so immense –

Her reference here may be to Shakespeare himself, but, otherwise, she was the poet who perceived and experienced the greatest richness, beauty, and terror in the familiar and near-at-hand, where she obviously found miracles of meaning (see, for instance, “I dreaded that first Robin

38 AIC

so...”). Still, one should not forget that her poetry of dread and despair (“I can wade Grief —... Power is only Pain —”) is also rooted in her New England Calvinism, where the pain of living is a source of strength.

Since, again from Emerson, poetry is the medium in which new awareness of the human condition can best be expressed, she also needs to see how that is practically done, so the principle of (all) poetry is to

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant —
Success in circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth’s superb surprise...

Her fundamentally tragic vision of life is not rarely accompanied by a jocular spirit intoxicated in the middle of physical nature, and so “I taste a liquor never brewed —” has been seen as a parody of Emerson’s “Bacchus”, with Dickinson announcing her preference for strong beer as against the Dionysian wine of inspiration called for by Emerson.

And part of her inspiration was “The Snow-Storm” (especially for “It sifts...”):

Announced by all the trumpets of the sky,
Arrives the snow, and, driving o’er the fields,
Seems nowhere to alight: the whited air
Hides hills and woods, the river, and the heaven,
And veils the farm-house at the garden’s end.
The sled and traveller stopped, the courier’s feet
Delayed, all friends shut out, the housemates sit
Around the radiant fireplace, enclosed
In a tumultuous privacy of storm.

Come see the north wind’s masonry.
Out of an unseen quarry evermore
Furnished with tile, the fierce artificer
Curves his white bastions with projected roof
Round every windward stake, or tree, or door.
Speeding, the myriad-handed, his wild work
So fanciful, so savage, nought cares he
For number or proportion. Mockingly
On coop and kennel he hangs Parian wreaths;
A swan-like form invests the hidden thorn;
Fills up the farmer’s lane from wall to wall,
Maugre the farmer’ sighs, and, at the gate
A tapering turret overtops the work.
And when his hours are numbered, and the world
Is all his own, retiring, as he were not,
Leaves, when the sun appears, astonished Art
To mimic in slow structures, stone by stone,
Built in an age, the mad wind’s night-work,
The frolic architecture of the snow.

Emerson’s 1835 28-line, blank verse, iambic pentameter poem (first published in *May-Day and Other Pieces*, 1841) may be regarded as a continuation of the snow symbolism in some of his essays; in fact, in 1832 (see *The Makers and the Making*, vol. I: 752), he is known to have promised:

“I will make a lecture on God’s architecture, one of his beautiful works, a Day. I will draw a sketch of a winter’s day.”

That he certainly did in “The Snow-Storm”, but what seems to be intriguing is that no commentator that we have come across questioned the validity or truthfulness of the first line of the poem, which simply states that it was a thunder snow-storm he was writing about, and since such a thing does not exist (or is, in any case, extremely rare), what he writes about does not exist, i.e. he writes – like most poets – about something else. Except for that line, the poem’s great and special quality is given by the movement from the powerful accuracy of the first stanza and the near-surrealism of the second section; thus, from a paradise of white (“whited air”) where the snow-storm “hides” and “veils” imperfect things, with the “housemates... around the radiant fireplace” (see Whittier) and the “tumultuous privacy of storm” to the “north wind’s masonry”, the “mad wind” and the “fierce artificer” developing a whole construction project (a result of the “sifting” in Dickinson), rejecting or ignoring all “number or proportion” in his “fanciful,” “savage,” “wild work”; while at work, he invests hidden forms with new, more beautiful shapes (like that of the swan), makes “the world... all his own”, then “retiring, as he were not” (Dickinson’s “denying... the Artisans... have been”) and leaving behind “astonished art”, i.e. “the frolic architecture of the snow” (Dickinson’s playing and playful flakes); these shrewd analogies and contrasts between the natural forms created by the (American) winds of the storm and the (British, European) man-made architectural forms make us wonder if we are not looking at “primitive”, “natural” American art confronting the sophisticated, learned, deliberate artistry of the Old World. In the white space between the two stanzas the speaker seems to have moved outdoors, away from the “slow structures,” as he represents the Americans trying to create their own literature and not wanting to be noddies to the British, for instance, in their effort toward something free, and big, and brash; the North wind creates the new world out of snow, in liberated forms of language and no strictures (levelling – see *supra*, Dickinson) of usage. The new man ought to turn to nature for inspiration (as in many of his *Essays*), and “the wilder, the less human the nature he turns to, the better” (Waggoner: 77). So, the poem also teaches a lesson in “wildness,” which Thoreau was going to follow verbatim.

What Emerson proves here – and, more particularly, in the last four lines of the poem, a kind of organic outgrowth of the whole poem – is that the poet (Emerson or Dickinson) should be able to make the *image* work as a vital symbol of an *idea*. How Dickinson read the poem (and other poems and the essays) is almost too obvious to insist upon: she simply took over from him the notion of poetry as the power capable of transforming human habits of perception and of lighting up the world we live in, in new ways; and so both poets can look at the way snow settled *peacefully* atop, aside, and within the structures (Dickinson’s wrinkled, old road) of the normal human world which a day before were bare; creativity is meant to fill the universe with sense. However, where Emerson is loud, and strong, fierce and tumultuous, speeding and savage, Dickinson is soft and gentle, lovely and peaceful, “sifting” and “wrapping”; while Emerson gives us the violence from the title onwards, Dickinson never uses the word “snow,” so we have to guess it from such expressed or implied words as “flour”, “wool”, “fleece” or “vail”; while the master craftsman or supreme artist is an “artificer” (see *infra*) in one case, he is an “artisan” in the other; where Emerson’s metaphors are straightforward and expressed in even and measured verse, Dickinson is elliptical, more concise, telegraphic even, fragmented and metaphysical; the influence is there, but it is that of one great poet onto another great(er) poet.

But, before we return to Dickinson, let us also notice that there were others behind Emerson’s “rugged grandeur”, too; among others, he seems to have been familiar with the work of Wilhelm Müller, who wrote poems of winter set to music by Franz Schubert in his “Die Winterreise” cycle of Lieder (1827). But, most importantly, he is indebted to Coleridge, as his “Snow-Storm” seems to be a response to the English Romantic’s “Frost at Midnight” (1798), one of the latter’s “conversation poems” (i.e. sent to friends) along with “The Eolian Harp” (1798), “The Lime-Tree Bower Thy Prison” (1797), and “Fears in Solitude” (1798); this is a 74-line verse monologue in

blank verse and iambic pentameter – an elaborate poem re-written many times and printed in seven different versions. Emerson was surely interested in Coleridge’s idea of “One Life” which connects mankind to nature and to God. The poem describes the natural progression of the speaker’s / poet’s mind as he sits up late one winter night thinking, mostly, about the scene containing “the silent ministry of frost” – with which the poems both begins and ends, and bearing more than a casual resemblance to “the frolic architecture of the snow” (even inviting such combinatorial variants as “the silent architecture of the frost” or “the frolic ministry of snow”), the cry of the owl, and the sleeping child. In Coleridge’s Neo-Platonism, nature represents the physical presence of God’s word, and his meditation – including “the secret ministry of frost” – becomes part of the divine language of nature, more than Emerson could have wished for himself. Otherwise, the Coleridge poem has most of the standard components of a snow-poem template: “the inmates of my cottage”, “extreme silentness,” memories of school and childhood and birth-place, such “presences” as the schoolmaster, the aunt, the sister (see Whittier), and the playmate...

Among Coleridge’s sources, critics mention the philosophical ideas of George Berkeley and David Hartley, the poetry of William Collins and John Thelwall (“To the Infant Hampden”), and especially William Cowper’s *The Task* – a long mock-heroic and mock-Miltonic poem in blank verse, of whose six books (“The Sofa”, “The Time-Piece”, “The Garden”, “The Winter Evening”, “The Winter Morning Walk” and “The Winter Walk at Noon”) three are, obviously, set in winter; in “The Sofa” Cowper knows that “God made the country and man made the town” (l.749), while in Book VI he writes about God as “the great artificer /n.b./ of all that moves” (so he was also directly behind Emerson); typical for our series of snow poems is Book IV, “The Winter Evening”, focusing on the fall of snow and the need for simplicity, truth, and sincerity, on mind and nature, retired life and religious faith, and the religion of God and nature.

Dickinson’s apparently uneventful life was next destined to experience another tragic “love story”, including Reverend Charles Wadsworth, pastor of the Arch Presbyterian Church of Philadelphia, who visited her father in 1859 (when he was forty-five and she twenty-nine); but not only was Wadsworth an uncommonly compelling preacher (she will have seen and listened to him in the pulpit) and an upstanding and righteous man of God, but also a family man with wife and children; for Emily, however, he somehow came to represent a spiritual leader, a father-figure, and a “lover”; so that when, in 1861 Wadsworth accepted a call to the Calvary (n.b.) Church in San Francisco (the end of the world then), the poetess passed from a highly emotional state into a major crisis in her life (the 366 poems of 1862); “calvary” appears in several of her poems, she pictured herself as a bride or queen (see “It sifts...”, too) and began to dress entirely in white, adopting her “white election” (another source of our title) as she called it – doubled by the absolute conviction that immortality awaited her, expressed in images showing her freedom from the grave, a soul purified and regenerated, and the life eternal (with the human world as an “infested prison”):

Mine – by the Right of the White Election!
 Mine – by the royal Seal!
 Mine – by the Sign of the Scarlet prison –
 Bars – cannot conceal!

Mine – here – in Vision – and in Veto!
 Mine – by the Grave’s Repeal –
 Title – Confirmed –
 Delirious Charter!
 Mine – long as Ages steal!

To the end of her life (Wadsworth died in 1882), Dickinson became the epigrammatic recluse, clad exclusively in the white gown she adopted as what might be called her stage costume; this

has also been seen as the onset of winter in her soul (poetry of fear, loss, renunciation and exquisite despair) that fully and finally confirmed her genius.

And now, we need to stay in America for other Emersonian snow-poem prolongations, the first one of which is “schoolroom” or “fireside poet” John Greenleaf Whittier. We first find the key situation of the family gathered about a fire while the “evil power” of the winter storm / and of the world / goes shrieking by in “The Frost Spirit” of 1830. Still, the real germ of “Snow-Bound” can be found in “To My Old Schoolmaster”, i.e. Joshua Coffin, though this important figure in the poet’s early life, absorbed into that of the schoolmaster in this poem, is ordinarily taken to refer to one George Haskell. Sometime in 1865 the poet writes to his publisher, Jamie Fields, that he was writing a poem giving “a homely picture of old New England homes” – a poem that was completed in October 1865 and published in book form, with unprecedented editorial and financial success, in February 1866. What provoked the writing of “Snow-Bound” was the bereavement caused by the death of his younger sister Elizabeth on September 3, 1864. This is thus an autobiographical poem rooted in this profound depression, doubled by the poet’s acceptance of divine will in a philosophy that linked home, hearth, and heaven. And so “Snow-Bound” unites the three subjects on which Whittier could write best: memories of childhood, nature, and the demands of a religious conscience.

This is a lengthy, 759-line narrative poem in iambic tetrameter, organized thematically or chronologically structured “stanzas” in rhymed couplets; subtitled “A Winter Idyll”, the poem is preceded by an epigraph from Emerson’s “Snow-Storm” (its first stanza: “Announced by all the trumpets of the sky... In a tumultuous privacy of storm”), and a prefatory note titled “To the Memory of the Household it Describes, this Poem is Dedicated by the Author”; this is, in fact, a prose account of much that follows in poetic form. The main device is that of isolating a certain world (that of his childhood home at Haverhill, Massachusetts), based upon the convention of describing the events that occurred – and the stories that were told –, when a snowstorm cut his family off from the rest of the world; one cannot help thinking that the poem is *bound* within the white pages where it appears – so snow and whiteness function as an enclosure, inside whose fences / margins the poet chronicles a rural New England family in Whittier’s home place, as a storm rages outside for three days (they stay isolated for a week).

The wonderfully descriptive opening lines are worth quoting here:

The sun that brief December day
 Rose cheerless over hills of gray
 And, darkly circled, gave at noon
 A sadder light than waning moon.
 Slow tracing down the thickening sky
 It mute and ominous prophecy,
 A portent seeming less than threat,
 It sank from sight before it set.
 A chill no coat, however stout,
 Of homespun stuff could quite shut out,
 A hard, dull bitterness of cold,
 That checked, mid-vein, the circling race
 Of lifeblood in the sharpened face,
 The coming of the snow-storm told.
 The wind blew east: we heard the roar
 Of Ocean on his wintry shore,
 And felt the strong pulse throbbing there
 Beat with low rhythm our inland air.

Under this “canopy” of enclosing snow, the family and friends (father, mother, uncle, aunt,

elder sister, *younger sister*, a student from Dartmouth who was earning his way through school by teaching at the district school while boarding with the Whittiers, and the “half-welcome guest” /see *infra*/ Harriet Livermore) gather in front of the fire and tell stories (within the Whittier general “story”) – thus characters that are integral players in the narrative the poet is sharing as a participant himself. There are minor activities of the family impressed by the strange appearance of everything covered with snow (see Emerson, Dickinson...), caring of animals, the morning snow plow after the second night, the coming of the first village paper in a week and the final nostalgia (ll. 740-747...):

Yet, haply, in some lull of life,
Some trace of God which breaks its strife,
The worldling's /i.e. Whittier's/ eyes shall gather dew,
Dreaming in throngful city ways
Of winter joys his boyhood knew;
And dear and early friends – the few
Who yet remain – shall pause to view
These Flemish pictures of old days...

Just before this section, the poem culminates in the long religious meditation beginning –

“Clasp, angel of the backward look
And folded wings of ashen gray
And voice of echoes far away,
The brazen covers of thy book;
The weird palimpsest old and vast,
Wherein thou hid'st the spectral past...” (ll. 715-720..., 738)

From the group around the fireplace, emerge three sharp and memorable portraits: those of the spinster aunt, of the schoolmaster, and of Harriet Livermore. Thematically related to both Elizabeth Whittier and Whittier himself, the “dear aunt”, “The sweetest woman ever Fate / Perverse denied a household mate”, “a calm and gracious element...” called up “her girlhood memories”, including a tragic love affair; then “the master of the district school”, who “sang songs, and told us what befalls / In classic Dartmouth's college halls,” “tuned his merry violin” or “played the athlete in the barn” and “told / Of classic legends rare and old” (as already suggested, there are echoes here of Whittier's real teacher Joshua Coffin, but the student, whose name Whittier had forgotten, was George Haskell, who died in 1876); but by far the most prominent is the “not unfear'd, half-welcome guest” Harriet Livermore, of whom we know everything from the prefatory note:

daughter of Judge Livermore, of New Hampshire, a young woman of fine natural ability, enthusiastic, eccentric, with slight control over her violent temper, which sometimes made her religious profession doubtful. She was equally ready to exhort in school-house prayer-meetings and dance in a Washington ball-room, while her father was a member of Congress. She early embraced the doctrine of the Second Advent, and felt it her duty to proclaim the Lord's speedy coming. With this message she crossed the Atlantic and spent the greater part of a long life in travelling over Europe and Asia. She lived some time with Lady Hester Stanhope, a woman as fantastic and mentally strained as herself / notable English eccentric, 1776-1839, led a brilliant life in London as companion of her uncle, William Pitt the Younger, then settled in Lebanon in 1810, where she became despot over a small area, using a mace to punish her many local retainers,... and indulged her beliefs in transmigration of the soul... /, on the slope of Mt. Lebanon, but finally quarrelled with her in regard to two white horses with red marks on their backs which suggested the idea of saddles, on which her titled hostess expected to ride into Jerusalem with the Lord. A friend of mine found her, when quite an old woman, wandering in Syria with a tribe of Arabs, who

with the Oriental notion that madness is inspiration, accepted her as their prophetess and leader. At the time referred to in 'Snow-Bound' she was boarding at the Rocks Village about two miles from us (see Norton Anthology, I: 1331, including footnote).

We can also remind here that she got converted to Quakerism (Whittier was himself a Quaker), but, during an argument with another Quaker on a point of doctrine, asserted her theological view by seizing a length of stove wood and laying out against her antagonist.

So, quite an assembly of characters, a gallery of individual portraits, each with his / her specific dramatization of the problem of Time (and Change) in a first section (or perspective) focused upon the inviolability of the fireside world (ll.175-211) during the first two days and nights; then there is a second perspective (ll.400-437) concerned with the poet's recent bereavement – the absent Elizabeth –, the poet's personal future as he walks toward the night and sees her beckoning hand, and the obligations, joys and promises of the present (l.674 and foll.); and a third (ll.715-759), including the religious meditation mentioned before, new considerations, a dream of the past, and the haunting simplicity of the end; the "worldling" is invited to seek in the past not only a sense of personal renewal and continuity, but also a sense of the continuity of the new order with the American past.

Though Whittier's main and real concern is not nature, but people (occupying two thirds of the poem), the former creates a context or backdrop in its being mindless, unmeaning, blind, blank, and threatening, in its being "dark", alien, "cheerless", "sad", "ominous", "cold" (of course), "hard", "dreary", "bitter", and "gray"; thus, life imagery of security ("unfading green" and "green hills", "pleasant circle", warmth and light), as opposed to death imagery (snow on graves, blackness...); man appears as actively threatened by a hostile environment and brought to know his essential humanity by that threat.

No wonder then that an astute critic like Waggoner sees it as "a document of considerable importance in nineteenth-century intellectual history"(76), a poem about the imagination that does not only give us a faithful treatment of American village and rural life in general, combined with the poet's sense of approaching death (though he survived its publication by twenty-six years) and, thus, a summary of his life and work, but also a summarizing moment for the country, poised as it was (at the end of the Civil War) on the threshold of a new life, characterized by technology, big business, finance capitalism, and urban values. "Snow-Bound" thus sets Whittier into relation with the obsessive theme of the past in American literature (see also Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, Melville, Faulkner...); i.e. the problem of the past and future as generalized, rather than personal, and that is, once again and after all, an intuition of what it means to be an American, rooted in the philosophy of Whittier's own Christian humanism re-enforced by Emerson's nature mysticism (in the "Snow-Storm" and elsewhere). As it fits any Puritan New Englander – and any schoolroom poet (William Cullen Bryant, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Oliver Wendell Holmes, James Russel Lowell, and Whittier himself) –, he knows that the final lesson nature has to teach us is the necessity of moral commitment, alongside with an intuitive capacity to see personal fate as an image for a general cultural and philosophical situation; "Snow-Bound" gave Whittier a chance to utilize his personal memories and raise them to national, if not universal, significance.

If one were to continue exploring snow poems and their often terrible whiteness, and isolation, and loneliness, combined with age and death, one would have to return to Emerson and quote a passage from "Experience", an essay published in 1844 and occasioned, like Whittier's "Snow-Bound" (sister Elizabeth), Lowell's "First Snowfall" (daughter Blanche), and Longfellow's "The Cross of Snow" (wife Fanny), by the tragic death of a very dear family member (in this case, that of son Waldo, aged five, in 1842):

Life is a series of surprises, and would not be worth taking or keeping if it were not. God delights to isolate / n.b./ us every day, and hide from us the past and the future. We would look about us, but with grand politeness

44 AIC

be draws down before us an impenetrable screen of purest sky, and another behind us of purest sky / or snow, for that matter/. "You will not remember", he seems to say, "and you will not expect". (Norton Anthology, I: 1008)

So, memory and isolation, plus some other thematic motifs added by these fireside / school-room / household 19th-century American poets, all of whom wrote in more or less standard forms, in regular rhythms and rhymed stanzas; first (i.e. second, after Whittier), Lowell's fifteen-month old Blanche died in 1845 (followed by Rose – a few months of age – in 1849, two-year old Walter in 1850, and wife Maria, a poetess herself, in 1853), and in 1847 "The First Snowfall" was published; the typical initial description, including –

Every pine and fir and hemlock
Wore ermine too dear for an earl,
And the purest twig on the elm-tree
Was ridged inch deep with pearl... –

as well as the Emersonian "swan's down" and the "noiseless work of the sky", is followed by the poet's memory and thought of the "little headstone" grave and how "the flakes were folding it gently". Dickinson's "leaden sky" is also present as an anticipation:

Again I looked at the snowfall,
And thought of the leaden sky,
That arched o'er our first great sorrow,
When that mound was heaped so high...

The snow, however, is "healing and hiding / The scar of our deep-plunged woe...", it "hushes all" (levelling everything?) and folds everything under it (i.e. covers the "wrinkles of the road").

"Snow-Flakes" provides for Longfellow the opportunity to express his "secret despair / Long in its clouded bosom hoarded...", but also to provide a description that has already become standard:

Out of the bosom of the Air,
Out of the cloud-folds of her garments shaken,
Over the woodlands brown and bare,
Over the harvest-fields forsaken,
Silent, and soft, and slow
Descends the snow.

The shapes it takes are, again, "divine expression", while "the troubled sky reveals / The grief it feels". The poet's real grief, however, comes a few years later (1879), when nature provides for him the occasion – and the image – for embodying the tragic death of his second wife, Fanny Appleton, who had been fatally burned eighteen years "ago", just before Christmas of 1861, when the dress she was wearing, while sealing up locks of her daughter's hair, caught fire (also injuring Longfellow's face); the sonnet is titled "The Cross of Snow", and, like most of the other poems here, depends on the uses of memory, meditation, pain, isolation, loneliness and, obviously, whiteness and death:

In the long sleepless watches of the night,
A gentle face – the face of one long dead –
Looks at me from the wall, where round its head
The night-lamp casts a halo of pale light.
Here in this room she died; and soul more white

Never through martyrdom of fire was led
 To its repose; nor can in books be read'
 The legend of a life more benedight.
 There is a mountain in the distant West
 That, sun-defying, in its deep ravines
 Displays a cross of snow upon its side.
 Such is the cross I wear upon my breast
 These eighteen years, through all the changing scenes
 And seasons, changeless since the day she died.”

It might be appropriate not to end this paper before mentioning that one of its working titles was “The White Election” and another one, probably as well suited as the present one, was “In White, Gray... and Black”.

BIBLIOGRAPHY :

BAIR, John D.; Charles RYSKAMP (eds.), *The Poems of William Cowper*, vol. III, 1785-1800, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.

BROOKS, Cleanth et al. (eds.), *American Literature: The Makers and the Making*, vol. I-II, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973.

COLERIDGE, Ernest Hartley (ed.), *The Poems of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London: Oxford UP, 1935/1798, pp.240-242.

COLERIDGE, Samuel Taylor, *A Selection of His Finest Poems*, ed. H. J. Jackson, Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1994.

COWPER, William, *The Task and Other Poems*, Project Gutenberg eBook, 2003.

EMERSON, Ralph Waldo, *Poems*. New and Revised Edition, Cambridge, Mass.: The Riverside Press, 1898.

FOERSTER, Norman, *Nature in American Literature: Studies in the Modern View of Nature*, New York: Russell & Russell, 1950/1958; Macmillan, 1923.

FRANKLIN, R. W. (ed.), *The Manuscript Books of Emily Dickinson*, 2 vols., Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1981.

JOHNSON, Thomas H. (ed.), *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1955.

MARTIN, Brian (ed.), *Macmillan Anthologies of English Literature*, Volume 4, The Nineteenth Century, London: Macmillan Education Ltd., 1989.

MILFORD, H. S. (ed.), *The Complete Poetical Works of William Cowper*, London: Oxford UP, 1913.

PHILLIPS, Louis (ed.), *The Random House Treasury of Best-Loved Poems*, 2nd ed., New York: Random House, 1995.

STAUFFER, Donald Barlow, *A Short History of American Poetry*, New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1974.

VAN DOREN, Mark (ed.), *The Portable Emerson*, New York: the Viking Press, 1968/1946.

WAGGONER, Hyatt H., *American Poets. From the Puritans to the Present*, Rev. ed., Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State UP, 1984/1968.

Web Sources:

Snow-Bound web page

The Snow Storm by Ralph Waldo Emerson web page

The Task by William Cowper web page

S. T. Coleridge, “Frost at Midnight” web page

It sifts from Leaden Sieves web page

